

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 15

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
22 December 1982

The Bulgarian Connection: More Than the Pope Plot

Rome

It is interesting to see how neatly the tables are getting turned in regard to what the press calls the Bulgarian connection.

Within a matter of weeks, Bulgaria somehow begins to emerge as the aggrieved and innocent party. Italian judges engaged in painstaking investigations are cast as dunces or dupes (as suggested by West German intelligence sources to the New York Times). Yuri Andropov becomes

Europe by Claire Sterling

the guileless and apparently helpless victim of a conspiracy reaching from Moscow to CIA headquarters at Langley, Va. (Le Monde's idea, in Paris). The real villains of the piece, suggests Le Monde, are Andropov's arch-rivals in the Kremlin who, with the CIA's help, are disseminating disinformation throughout both the East and West to "destabilize" the new Soviet leadership.

That is a truly astonishing view of the case.

The Bulgarian connection has to do with three separate and sinister operations in the West which have been traced directly to the Bulgarian secret service. They are:

- 1) The most colossal smuggling ring uncovered in our time, doing a multi-billion-dollar, two-way trade in heroin and arms between the Middle East and Western Europe.

- 2) The use of a compromised Italian labor leader to infiltrate (and possibly manipulate) Italy's Red Brigades, spy on Poland's Solidarity and help out in a proposed plot to assassinate Lech Walesa.

- 3) The plot to kill the pope.

Three Italian judges, each of impeccable standing, had collected most of the damning evidence on Bulgaria while Brezhnev was still alive and Andropov was still head of the KGB, supervising his Bulgarian subalterns. That may be an awkward fact, now that he has taken Brezhnev's place, but it is a fact all the same.

Judge Carlo Palermo had spent two years investigating the dope-and-gun ring in the Italian north. Over 200 gangsters of assorted nationality were arrested when he cracked down late last November. Their heroin supply had been coming from Syria and Turkey through Bulgaria to the West, mostly in sealed trucks. The smuggled weapons—everything from Browning automatics and hand grenades to Colt helicopters and Leopard tanks—had gone back east either by sea or overland through Bulgaria again, to Syria, Iraq, Iran, various Palestinian formations and Turkish terrorists of both the right and left.

A mass of evidence in Judge Palermo's hands showed that: The ring's big deals were almost invariably made at the Cafe Berlin and Hotel Vitosha in Sofia, the Bulgarian capital; a major role was played by the Turkish arms Mafia operating in Sofia under the direct control of the Bulgarian secret service, and the smuggled goods were passing freely through Bulgaria without customs control. Of all the countries asked to help in Judge Palermo's investigation, Bulgaria alone refused.

Judge Ferdinando Imposimato has been investigating the bent Italian labor leader, Luigi Scricciolo since General Dozier was kidnapped by the Red Brigades last winter. Director of the Socialist labor federation, UIL, Scricciolo was fingered by his cousin Loris after the latter's arrest as a Red Brigadier during the Dozier affair. His steadfast denials lasted from February until July, when he confessed to having been a Bulgarian agent since 1977.

Little by little, Scricciolo has added details, admitting that he had participated in Red Brigade summit meetings and served as their liaison with the Bulgarians. Some weeks ago, he also admitted that his Bulgarian control had asked him to help arrange for Lech Walesa's assassination during the latter's visit to Rome last January. He refused, he said.

Judge Florio Martella has been investigating since September 1981. Exceptionally meticulous, cautious and correct, his refusal to leak a word on his findings has maddened many a reporter, myself included. As I have learned in my own year-long search in this case, however, there were clues pointing toward Bulgaria from the start.

Several were provided by the Pope's would-be assassin, Mehmet Ali Agca, in his earliest interrogation immediately after the attack on May 13, 1981. By the following Dec. 29 he had begun to make a fuller confession to the Italian secret service. By last May he was talking a blue streak to Judge Martella during a weeklong second interrogation. Soon afterward, Judge Martella issued his first order of arrest for a Turkish accomplice, Omer Bagci, who was promptly found by the Swiss police and extradited to Italy. But the judge waited five months before issuing arrest warrants for three other Turks and two Bulgarians. (A third Bulgarian he wanted was protected by diplomatic immunity, and had skipped the country anyway.)

One of the Turks was Bekig Celenk, an illustrious godfather of the Turkish arms Mafia, accused of introducing Agca to the Bulgarian secret service in Sofia, and of offering him three million West German marks to kill the pope. Celenk was living freely in Munich, where he had just founded an "export-import" company, when he learned of Martella's warrant and flew straight to Sofia.

The arrested Bulgarian, Serghei Antonov, had been assistant manager of his country's state airline in Rome. The Bulgarian embassy cashier Vassilievi Kolev, also sought by Martella, had already taken off for home. Both were identified by Agca, along with the absent third Bulgarian, Todor Ayvazov, when the Italian secret service showed him a large album of assorted photographs. (Scricciolo had identified another three Bulgarians from the same album.)

The proof of Bulgaria's guilt in the plot to kill the pope is much too complex to explain in a couple of newspaper paragraphs.

Italy's civilian and military secret services pronounced the proof conclusive at a recent summit meeting. Prime Minister Fanfani has said this was now a matter of fact, no longer of speculation. Socialist Defense Minister Lagorio has told parliament that the "Bulgarian trial arouses and justifies the gravest preoccupation."

Judge Martella himself will reveal nothing more until he is ready to go to trial. But nobody who has watched him work could believe that his accusations against Bulgaria were based on the word of Mehmet Ali Agca alone. It is peculiarly offensive, furthermore, to insinuate that this severely scrupulous judge would have acted under political pressure from Washington or Rome.

That said, the question remains of what on earth Italy and its Western allies are supposed to do now. The enormity of the charges makes any conventional response look silly. Does Italy merely break off diplomatic relations with Bulgaria because it tried to eliminate the head of the Catholic Church? What does President Reagan do when and if he comes face to face with the present ruler of the Soviet Union, who had presided over the KGB when it must have given the nod to the Pope's would-be assassins?

The one thing one hopes the West will not do is give in to understandable temptation, and try sweeping it all under the rug. Its preference for discreet silence during a decade or more of Soviet support for international terrorism has simply encouraged bigger and bolder assaults culminating in what Premier Fanfani has called "the gravest act of destabilization the world has seen for 60 years." Since silence has gotten us nowhere, why not at least try the dissuasive force of public exposure?

Claire Sterling, a writer who lives in Rome, is working on a book about the Agca case.